



Network News

Happy New Year!
January 2009

Welcome to the first monthly issue of the VA Heart of Texas Health Care Network's newsletter, which will be known as **Network News**. It will contain brief information on our Network's health care expansions, construction updates, special events, etc., for you to share with your stakeholders and constituents. Each issue of *Network News* will be posted on our web site at www.heartoftexas.va.gov.

Shinseki nominated for VA Secretary: The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee has scheduled a confirmation hearing on January 14 for the nomination of Retired Army General Eric Shinseki to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA). Shinseki was born in Hawaii on November 28, 1942 to Japanese-American parents and is the first Asian-American four-star general in US history.

After graduating from the United States Military Academy in 1965, Shinseki took a brief break from the military life, earning an MA in English Literature from Duke University. He lost part of his foot during combat in the Vietnam War.



VA to offer health care to previously ineligible veterans: The VA announced on January 9 plans to re-open enrollment in its health care system by July 2009 to about 265,000 veterans whose incomes exceed current limits. The change affects veterans whose incomes exceed the current VA means test and geographic means test income thresholds by 10 percent or less. Congress provided funds in VA's fiscal year 2009 budget to support the new enrollment. The rule will take effect by June 30, 2009.

Enrollment for the lowest priority of the eight groups—veterans who are not being compensated for a military-related disability and who have incomes above a set threshold—was suspended on January 18, 2003, although veterans in that priority group who were already enrolled for care were permitted to remain enrolled.

VA originally suspended enrollment for Priority 8 veterans because it was unable to provide all enrolled veterans with timely access to its health care due to a tremendous growth in the number of veterans then seeking enrollment. VA now plans to reopen enrollment for a portion of these veterans without compromising the VA's ability to provide high quality health care services to all enrolled veterans who are eligible for care.

Marlin VAMC transfer ceremony: A ceremony to transfer the Thomas T. Connally VA Medical Center to the State of Texas' Department of Criminal Justice is on January 16 at 9:30 am at 1016 Ward St., Marlin, Texas. **Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison** and **Congressman John Carter** will participate in the ceremony.

For Your Calendar: **Network Director Timothy P. Shea** will host Veteran Service Organization Briefings on the following dates/locations:

- February 23 at 2 pm – South Texas Veterans Health Care System, San Antonio
- February 25 at 2 pm – VA North Texas Health Care System, Dallas
- March 31 at 2 pm - Central Texas Veterans Health Care System, Temple

Valley Coastal Bend updates: Specialty clinic services, pulmonary, pulmonary function testing, podiatry, cardiology, and telederm will be available to Valley veterans at the former Harlingen Outpatient Clinic located at 1629 Treasure Hills Blvd., Harlingen, Texas. Services are provided by VA staff specialists or through fee services in the local community. The Harlingen Ambulatory Surgery and Specialty Outpatient Center Project award and the Inpatient and Emergency Services Contract award are expected in the near future.

The Rural Mobile Health Clinic contract is also expected to be awarded soon. The mobile clinic will be based out of McAllen and Laredo and will travel to the proposed cities listed below and back to McAllen/Laredo on the same day.

- Rio Grande City (Starr County, District 28, **Congressman Henry Cuellar**)
- Roma (Starr County, District 28, **Congressman Henry Cuellar**)
- Zapata (Zapata County, District 28, **Congressman Henry Cuellar**)
- Falfurrias (Brooks County, District 15, **Congressman Ruben Hinojosa**)
- Hebbronville (Jim Hogg County, District 28, **Congressman Henry Cuellar**)
- Alice (Jim Wells County, District 15, **Congressman Ruben Hinojosa**)
- Raymondville (Willacy County, District 27, **Congressman Solomon Ortiz**)

Austin Women Veteran's Clinic opens: Women veterans are one of the fastest growing segments of the veteran population. There are approximately 1.8 million women veterans. They constitute nearly eight percent of the total veteran population and about five percent of all veterans who use VA health care. VA estimates that by 2020 women veterans will make up 10 percent of the veteran population.

On December 23, 2008, a ribbon cutting event to open a new Women Veteran's Clinic in Austin was held with **Congressman Lloyd Doggett** providing welcome remarks. The outpatient clinic is located at 2901 Montopolis Drive. The Central Texas Veterans Health Care System's **Women Veterans Coordinator** is **Minnie Garcia** and she can be reached at (512) 653-6854.



Fort Worth Outpatient Clinic (OPC) groundbreaking: On November 10, 2008, a groundbreaking event, with **Congressmen Chet Edwards, Michael Burgess** and **Joe Barton**, was held for the new Fort Worth OPC.

The 239,256 sq. ft. clinic is scheduled to open early spring 2011. In addition to its current services, the proposed expansion of specialty clinics include: cardiology, endoscopy, dermatology, pulmonary, endocrinology, prosthetics, methadone clinic, and women's clinic.

Expanded imaging services to be offered are CT, MRI, and mammography. The new clinic will be located near Interstate 20 and Interstate 35 West.

Travel reimbursement increase: Service-disabled and low-income veterans who are reimbursed for travel expenses while receiving care at VA facilities will see an increase in their payments beginning January 9. A recently passed law allows VA to cut the amount it must withhold from their mileage reimbursement. The deductible amount will be \$3 for each one-way trip and \$6 for each round trip -- with a calendar cap of \$18, or six one-way trips or three round trips, whichever comes first. The previous deductible was \$7.77 for a one-way trip, and \$15.54 for a round trip, with a calendar cap of \$46.62.

In November 2008, **VA Secretary James Peake** announced VA's second increase in the mileage reimbursement rate during 2008, from 28.5 cents to 41.5 cents a mile. Veterans traveling for Compensation and Pension examinations also qualify for mileage reimbursement. VA can waive deductibles if they cause financial hardship.

CTX and STX Directors: By the end of January, interviews for the Central Texas Veterans Health Care System (CTVHCS) and South Texas Veterans Health Care System (STVHCS) Directors will be completed. The candidate names will be forwarded to the VA Secretary for approval. It is expected that by early spring 2009 that those Directors will be announced. In the meantime, **Thomas Smith** is the **Acting Director**, CTVHCS, and **Jeff Milligan** is the **Acting Director**, STVHCS.

Welcome STX Assistant Director: **Toby Mathew** is the new **Assistant Director**, STVHCS. He was formerly a Health System Specialist, Veterans Health Administration's Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Operations and Management, Washington, D.C.

For more information on the VA Heart of Texas Health Care Network or *Network News*, please contact:

- Diana L. Struski, Public Affairs Officer, (817) 385-3768, Diana.Struski@va.gov;
- William McLemore, Congressional and Veterans Service Organizations Liaison, (210) 616-8143, William.McLemore@va.gov; or
- Hans Holkon, Customer Service Manager, (817) 385-3796, Hans.Holkon@va.gov.